

A Crisis of Enforcement: Corruption, Weak Institutions and the Invisibility of Human Trafficking Victims and Pakistan

Laiba Bashir (Corresponding Author)

Student of BS International Relations, University of Okara

Email: laibabashirahmadn@gmail.com

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Abstract

Human trafficking represents one of the gravest human rights crises of the 21st century, with an estimated 50 million individuals affected globally, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). Despite the proliferation of international legal frameworks such as the Palermo Protocol, ICCPR, UDHR, CRC, CEDAW and ILO Conventions trafficking remains entrenched due to a persistent crisis of enforcement, particularly in regions like South Asia. In Pakistan, weak institutional capacity, widespread corruption and fragile rule of law have contributed to the near-invisibility of victims and the impunity enjoyed by trafficking networks. This study critically examines the structural and systemic failures that enable human trafficking in Pakistan, situating the phenomenon within broader patterns of state neglect, economic inequality, gender-based violence and institutional decay. It underscores how trafficking for forced labor, sexual exploitation, organ removal and child exploitation is perpetuated by corrupt enforcement agencies, lack of victim-centered legal protections and the failure to operationalize existing human rights norms. Through comparative case studies from Pakistan and neighboring India, the paper highlights the operational dynamics of trafficking networks and the socio-political conditions that shield them. It advocates for a rights-based, gender-sensitive and victim-centered response that prioritize survivor rehabilitation, legal aid, community empowerment and institutional accountability. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that without comprehensive legal reform, anti-corruption measures and robust survivor support systems, efforts to combat human trafficking in Pakistan will remain ineffective. The crisis is not merely one of crime but of governance -- a failure to uphold the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable.

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Introduction

Human trafficking represents one of the most egregious violations of human rights in the contemporary global order. As defined by the United Nations, it involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer,

harboring, or receipt of persons by means of threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, or abuse of power for the purposes of exploitation. The internationally agreed definition, set forth in Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol, encompasses exploitation in the form of sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude and the removal of organs (The Diplomat, 2022). In spite of the enactment of sound international law and normative framework including the so-called United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (popularly abbreviated as the Palermo Protocol), the United Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and numerous ILO conventions (The Diplomat, 2022). The issue of human trafficking spread and survival is still shocking. The International labor organization (ILO) estimates that there are around 50 million modern-day slaves today and these slaves both male and female are being trafficked through forced labor, sexual exploitation and organ trafficking and child servitude. Such an alarming number highlights an international failure on the level of the institutions, will and institutional enforcement, rather than legal design (Library of Congress, 2025, March 31).

And there is no place where this enforcement crisis is so imminent than in the country of South-Asias and of Pakistan more specifically a country faced with endemic corruption, weak governance, economic and social inequality and entrenched gender inequalities as well. Pakistan sits in a privileged location at the intersection of the world map between South and central Asia, as well as the Middle East, thus making it a source and transit country in trafficking. Although there has been a national legal framework to criminalize trafficking, which includes the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2018), the reality experiences of the victims portray a mismatch between legal obligations and law practice. Trafficking continues to lead a gray life in the official discourse owing to the fact that victims particularly women, children and migrants either end up being criminalized or disregarded. Moreover, trafficking rings have been working practically on impunity because of political patronage, institutional indifference and culture of complacency in the criminal justice system (The Express Tribune, December 12, 2024).

What is core to the problem of Pakistan in fighting trafficking is the more fundamental issue of decay of the institution and the massive problems of corruption. In many cases, the law enforcement and even the border authorities along with the judiciary at some levels become part of the crime since they either directly benefit or fail in their duty to prevent crime. State agencies become ineffective or out-and-out counterproductive: bribes are accepted, political pressure invited in, no professional training is done. Nobody investigates the matter properly, hardly anybody prosecutes and nobody is even convicted. Meanwhile, victims have to deal with an insensitive, or even hostile, system. They tend to be re-victimized, denied the right to justice or rehabilitation and forced to be criminals instead of being people who are supposed to be given protection and compensation. This pathology in the institution is further complicated by a wider crisis of governance in which the state does not even provide the most minimal assurances of security, respect and equal treatment to the most marginal members of its society (The Express Tribune, 2024).

In addition to this, socioeconomic environment in Pakistan provides an ideal environment to trafficking. Massive poverty levels, educational inequality, internal displacement caused by war or climatic

catastrophes and deep-seated gender discrimination make huge portions of the women and men easy targets to exploitation. Especially at risk are women and children. Child labor, bonded labor in brick kilns and agriculture, commodification of women in informal marriage markets and trafficking of human organs happen in a background of economic helplessness and social alienation. The migrant workers, particularly those aspirants of taking up jobs in the Gulf States or directly in the informal sectors in their own domestic environment are fooled by illegal recruitment agents and labor brokers which work unregulated. In a number of incidences, the entire traffic routes are being perpetuated not only by the criminals but also by the passive or conspirators by the authorities in office (The Express Tribune, December 12, 2024).

The factor is that as far as the absence of trafficking victims in Pakistan is concerned, it cannot be attributed to either insufficient surveillance or data gathering. Instead, it is an entrenched result of state abandonment, social stigmatization and uninterested policies. The formal protection mechanisms exclude victims, particularly, those who belong to the socially marginalized groups of people, including low-income families, ethnic minorities and undocumented migrants. There is a lack of shelters, legal assistance and psychosocial supporting system, or they do not work. The national discourse is also hampered by the lack of a rights and a victim-centred perspective to trafficking. Media stories tend to report cases as sensational rather than look to structural reasons behind the issues and civil society efforts are hampered by a limited funding base, security concerns and state unreceptiveness (The Express Tribune, December 12, 2024).

This paper aims at interrogation of institutional and structural failures that sustain human trafficking in Pakistan. The important cases studied and comparative learning using the case studies of the neighboring country India where trafficking unfortunately exists at the same time but with different levels of response by their state, the paper gives the issue of trafficking in the context of governance failure, impunity and erosion of human rights. It highlights how the failure to implement international and domestic legal standards, combined with institutionalized corruption and societal indifference, has created a climate in which trafficking not only persists but also thrives. This crisis, therefore, is not merely a reflection of criminal behavior but of systemic failure a dereliction of the state's duty to protect its citizens and uphold their inherent dignity.

Understanding human trafficking

Human trafficking is a complex and deeply rooted global issue that violates fundamental human rights. It encompasses the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of individuals through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, with the intent of exploitation. Though trafficking can be domestic, many cases involve international networks that function across borders with alarming efficiency. The crime thrives on poverty, lack of education, systemic inequality, weak legal enforcement and demand for cheap labor and commercial sex. Victims are often trapped through deceit, false promises, threats and even familial betrayal.

Forms of Human Trafficking and Exploitation

1) Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation remains the most prevalent form of human trafficking. Victims, mainly women and girls, are lured with promises of employment, marriage, or better lives and are later forced

into prostitution or pornography. Traffickers maintain control through violence, debt bondage, social isolation and confiscation of identification documents.

For example, in 2020 Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) uncovered and dismantled a human trafficking network operating out of Gujranwala. The traffickers lured women with promises of legitimate job placements in Gulf countries. However, upon arrival, the victims were sold into sexual slavery and subjected to exploitation. The FIA arrested several suspects and rescued multiple victims, highlighting the ongoing issue of cross-border human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Pakistan. This case underscores the vulnerability of women seeking employment abroad and the need for stronger protections and enforcement against trafficking networks. (Dawn news, 2020)

Another example is of India, in 2021, police in Kolkata, uncovered a significant human trafficking ring that exploited teenage girls from West Bengal. The traffickers lured these girls with false promises of employment and a better life. Once recruited, the victims were transported to major cities such as Delhi and Mumbai, where they were forced into prostitution. The operation highlighted the vulnerability of young women and girls in economically disadvantaged regions and exposed the organized nature of trafficking networks operating across state lines. The case drew national attention to the urgent need for stronger law enforcement, victim protection and rehabilitation services in India. (Human Rights Watch, 2021)

2) Forced Labor

Victims of forced labor are coerced to work under abusive and exploitative conditions. This form of trafficking spans multiple industries, agriculture, construction, domestic service and textiles. Wages are either withheld or too low to escape debt, while working conditions remain unsafe and inhumane. For example, in Pakistan province of Sindh, bonded labor in brick kilns and cotton fields persists across generations, trapping workers in a cycle of debt and exploitation. Workers are often indebted through manipulated accounting systems where loans for seeds, fertilizers and living expenses are inflated or never properly accounted for, making it nearly impossible for laborers and their families to repay debts and escape bondage. Many laborers live in private jails controlled by property owners, facing harsh conditions including physical abuse and restrictions on movement (Zaheer D. M., Weak Institutions and the Invisibility of Human Trafficking Victims and Pakistan, 2025). Despite laws prohibiting bonded labor, enforcement remains weak and poverty forces many into these exploitative arrangements. A 1991 army raid freed 295 bonded laborers from a private jail of a major landlord in Sindh, highlighting the severity of the problem. Studies estimate millions of bonded laborers in Sindh's agricultural and brick kiln sectors, with families trapped for generations under these exploitative systems. (International Labour Organization, 2001)

Another major incident highlighting the persistence of bonded labor in India occurred in 2016, when authorities in Tamil Nadu rescued 333 bonded laborers including children from brick kilns in the Tiruvallur district. Many of these individuals had been trafficked from other states, such as Odisha and Chhattisgarh, after being lured with promises of employment and advance payments.

Upon arrival, they were confined to the kiln premises, subjected to long working hours and denied fair wages. Their movement was strictly controlled and debt bondage was maintained through manipulated records and inflated deductions, making escape nearly impossible. This rescue operation, supported by local NGOs, led to immediate relief for the victims and legal action against the kiln owners under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act. (Hindu, 2016)

3) Child trafficking

Children are among the most vulnerable groups to human trafficking due to several factors. Their dependency on adults for care and protection, combined with their limited awareness of risks and rights, makes them easy targets for traffickers. Children are trafficked for various exploitative purposes, including forced labor in industries such as agriculture, domestic work and manufacturing; sexual exploitation in prostitution and pornography; forced begging on streets; and even recruitment as child soldiers in armed conflicts. Because children often lack social protection mechanisms and may be separated from their families or communities, their exploitation frequently goes unnoticed or unreported. This invisibility increases their risk of prolonged abuse and hinders rescue and rehabilitation efforts. The trafficking of children violates their fundamental rights and has long-lasting physical, psychological and social consequences.

For example, in 2021, the Pakistan law enforcement authorities in Lahore uncovered a child trafficking ring operating at major railway stations. The traffickers targeted vulnerable street children, kidnapping them from busy public areas. Once in captivity, these children were subjected to physical abuse and forced into organized begging rings. The traffickers exploited the children's dependency and lack of social protection, using threats and violence to maintain control. This case revealed the ongoing risks faced by street children in urban Pakistan and the organized nature of trafficking networks that profit from child exploitation. The authorities' intervention led to the rescue of several children and the arrest of key suspects, drawing attention to the urgent need for stronger child protection and anti-trafficking measures in the country. (Dawn news, 2021)

Another example highlights that in India, children from economically disadvantaged states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are frequently targeted by traffickers who promise them or their families well-paying domestic jobs in large metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, or Kolkata. Once these children are transported away from their home communities, they often find themselves in exploitative situations. Many are confined to the homes of employers, forced to work long hours without proper rest and are subjected to physical and emotional abuse. Their wages are often withheld and they are denied access to education and healthcare. Because these children are isolated from their families and lack social protection, their exploitation often goes unnoticed and unreported. This pattern of trafficking for domestic servitude is a persistent problem in India and highlights the urgent need for stronger child protection laws and enforcement. (Save the Children, 2021)

4) Organ Trafficking

This trafficking is a secretive but highly profitable form of human trafficking. It involves the illegal buying and selling of organs, most often kidneys, taken from vulnerable individuals, usually from poor or marginalized communities. Victims are commonly tricked with false promises of money or forced through threats and manipulation. Many receive little or no payment and suffer serious health problems afterward, with no support for recovery. This illegal trade is fueled by a worldwide shortage of organs for transplantation and the willingness of wealthy patients to pay large sums for them. Traffickers, brokers and corrupt medical professionals and hospitals work together to carry out these operations, making huge profits. Meanwhile, victims endure long-lasting physical, mental and social harm. Detecting and prosecuting organ trafficking is challenging because it operates in secrecy, often across borders and involves criminal networks as well as corrupt officials. For example, in 2017, Pakistani authorities uncovered a kidney trafficking network operating in several private hospitals in Islamabad. The traffickers targeted poor laborers, enticing them with small payments in exchange for their kidneys. Many victims, desperate for money, agreed to undergo surgery without fully understanding the health risks or the true value of their organs. These kidneys were then sold at very high prices to wealthy buyers, often from Middle Eastern countries. Corrupt doctors and hospital staff secretly performed these operations. This case exposed how impoverished people are vulnerable to organ trafficking and revealed the involvement of some healthcare workers. Law enforcement arrested several suspects and increased oversight of private hospitals, yet organ trafficking remains a serious issue in the region. (Dawn, April 14, 2017; Zaheer D. M., *Weak Institutions and the Invisibility of Human Trafficking Victims and Pakistan*, 2025)

The 2008 Gurgaon kidney scandal was one of the most notorious organ trafficking cases in India. Authorities discovered an illegal network operating in Gurgaon (now Gurugram), near Delhi, where poor laborers were lured with promises of jobs or small cash payments. Once in captivity, these victims were drugged and their kidneys were removed without their informed consent. The harvested organs were then sold at high prices to wealthy recipients, including foreign nationals. The operation was run by a group of doctors, middlemen and hospital staff who exploited vulnerable people for profit. Many victims suffered severe health complications and received little or no compensation. This scandal exposed major loopholes in the regulation of private hospitals and organ transplantation in India, leading to public outrage and calls for stricter enforcement of the law. (India, 2013)

5) Forced Marriage and Servitude

Forced marriage is a grave violation of human rights that often results in the exploitation of women and girls. In these cases, individuals mainly women and girls are married without their genuine consent, frequently based on false promises or as part of financial arrangements between families. After marriage, they are usually expected to carry out unpaid work such as household chores, childcare and caring for elderly relatives, without any recognition or payment. This exploitation is worsened by a higher risk of domestic violence, as the absence of mutual consent creates an unequal power dynamic that can lead to physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Victims

of forced marriage often lose control over their lives, including decisions about education, employment and personal freedoms. The transactional nature of many forced marriages treats these individuals as commodities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and abuse. Consequently, forced marriage strips women and girls of their fundamental rights and dignity, exposing them to ongoing exploitation and harm. For example, in 2019, investigations revealed a large human trafficking network that lured over 600 to 900 Pakistani women, mostly from poor and marginalized communities, especially Christians, into fake marriages with Chinese men. Traffickers and local intermediaries who promised families financial incentives and a better life abroad arranged these marriages. However, upon arrival in China, many women were confined, physically abused and forced into domestic servitude or sexual exploitation, including prostitution. The marriages were often a cover for trafficking, leaving women isolated and vulnerable in a foreign country. Pakistani authorities arrested numerous Chinese nationals and local accomplices, including some community pastors and a fake priest, involved in the racket. Despite crackdowns, the trafficking trade reportedly continued, highlighting serious gaps in cross-border law enforcement and protection for vulnerable women. China denied the allegations but cooperated with Pakistan in investigations. (ALJAZEERA, December 05, 2019)

Another example, the trafficking of girls from states like Assam and Jharkhand to regions such as Haryana and Punjab is driven by skewed gender ratios in these destination states, where there are fewer women than men. This imbalance creates a demand for brides, leading to the trafficking of poor girls under false promises. Once trafficked, many women face abusive marriages and are treated as domestic slaves, enduring physical, emotional abuse and forced labor. This phenomenon is linked to factors such as poverty, female feticide, infanticide and dowry practices, which worsen the gender imbalance and increase vulnerability to trafficking. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)

International legal frameworks

1) The Palermo Protocol

The Palermo Protocol, formally known as the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, was adopted in 2000 as a supplementary instrument to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC). It represents a landmark in international efforts to combat human trafficking, offering a unified legal and policy framework for states to address this complex and evolving transnational crime. The Protocol is particularly significant because it establishes, for the first time at the international level, a clear and comprehensive definition of trafficking in persons, which has since become the global standard.

According to Article 3 of the Protocol, trafficking in persons involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means such as threat, use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or

other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2000)

Key aspects of the Palermo Protocol

Protection: This one of the most important elements of Protocol focuses on rights and safety of the victims. It entails availing of assistance in the form of counseling, shelter, medical services and legal support. The victims are to be treated with dignity and additional consideration is given towards the women and children. More so, the victims can be given rights to be considered as citizens of the country where they get discovered.

Prosecution: The given key point states that the human trafficking is a crime by the international agreement known as Protocol. It includes such actions as recruiting, trafficking and exploitation of individuals by use of force, deception, or misuse of authority. Even the consent of a victim is said to be irrelevant in the case of the use of any form of fraud or force. It also promoted nations to cooperate in investigating and penalizing of traffickers with punishment relative to the severity of the offense. The following reasons may explain why the idea of the workers may leave the government without recourse and not the workers. The government may be unable to get recourse because of the idea of the workers and not because one is a worker (U.S. Department of State , 2023).

The Protocol has a broad definition of trafficking by observing that trafficking involves recruitment, transportation and exploitation by coercion, deception or abuse of power together with focusing on the vulnerability of women and children. As long as deception or coercion is indicated, the question of consent on the part of the victim does not matter. It is the most adopted international document against human trafficking by over 178 countries in the whole world. Its implementation is supported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) that assists states in drawing laws and anti-trafficking strategies (UNODC, 2021).

2) Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): Prohibition of Slavery and Slave Trade

Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) explicitly prohibits slavery and the slave trade in all their forms. It states that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (United Nations, 1948, art. 4). This article establishes an absolute ban on slavery, recognizing it as a fundamental violation of human dignity and freedom. The prohibition extends to all forms of slavery, including traditional chattel slavery, forced labor, debt bondage and human trafficking. The inclusion of this provision in the UDHR reflects the global consensus following World War II to eradicate slavery, which had persisted in various forms despite earlier abolition efforts. Article 4 serves as a cornerstone for international human rights law and has inspired numerous binding treaties and national legislations aimed at abolishing slavery and protecting victims. Importantly, Article 4 underscores that slavery and the slave trade are incompatible with the principles of equality and freedom enshrined in the UDHR.

It obliges states to take effective measures to prevent these practices, prosecute offenders and provide remedies for victims. While slavery was formally abolished in many countries by the mid-20th century, modern forms of slavery continue to exist, making Article 4's protections critical in contemporary human rights enforcement. (United Nations, 1948)

3) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR):

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted in 1966 and effective from 1976, is a key international treaty that legally binds its parties to protect fundamental civil and political rights. Article 8 of the ICCPR explicitly prohibits slavery, the slave trade, servitude and forced or compulsory labor in all forms. It states that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude and it forbids forced labor except in narrowly defined circumstances such as lawful imprisonment, military service, or emergencies threatening the community. This article strengthens the global legal framework against modern slavery by obliging states to criminalize these practices, prevent their occurrence and provide effective remedies to victims. The ICCPR's prohibition is absolute and reflects the principle that slavery and servitude are severe violations of human dignity and freedom. By ratifying the ICCPR, states commit to upholding these protections and cooperating internationally to combat trafficking, forced labor and exploitation. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [2023], 2023)

4) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and entering into force in 1990, is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty focused on protecting the rights of children under 18 years of age. One of its key provisions requires states to take all appropriate measures to prevent child trafficking, sale and abduction, recognizing these acts as severe violations of children's rights and dignity. The CRC obliges states to enact legislation and implement policies that safeguard children from exploitation and abuse, including trafficking for labor, sexual exploitation, or illegal adoption. It emphasizes the best interests of the child as a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. Additionally, the Convention mandates cooperation among states to combat transnational child trafficking and to ensure recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration of affected children. Through Articles such as Article 35, which explicitly prohibits the abduction, sale, or trafficking of children, the CRC establishes a comprehensive legal framework for child protection. It also calls for measures to prevent the exploitation of children and to ensure their right to identity, family life and protection from harm. (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 1989)

5) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Article 6 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) requires States Parties to take all appropriate measures, including legislative action, to suppress all forms of trafficking in women and the exploitation of prostitution. This obligation reflects CEDAW's broader commitment to eliminating discrimination and violence against women, recognizing trafficking and prostitution as severe violations of women's human rights and

dignity. The Convention's preamble acknowledges persistent discrimination against women and emphasizes the need for equality and respect for human dignity as fundamental principles. Article 6 mandates states to criminalize trafficking and related exploitation, implement preventive measures, protect victims and provide support services. It also calls for international cooperation to combat cross-border trafficking. This article is unique in its explicit focus on women's vulnerability to trafficking and sexual exploitation, linking gender discrimination to these abuses. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee) regularly monitors state compliance, issuing recommendations to strengthen legal frameworks and enforcement. In short, Article 6 of CEDAW is a critical legal tool obliging states to actively combat trafficking in women and exploitation, contributing to the global fight against human trafficking. (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2004)

6) ILO Forced Labour Conventions

In its efforts to fight forced labor and the worst form of child labor, International Labor Organization (ILO) has come up with important conventions to address the issue. Forced labor is banned in conventions No. 29 (Forced Labor Convention, 1930) and No. 105 (Abolition of Forced Labor Convention, 1957) which refer to all forced or compulsory labor. Forced labor has been defined by Convention No. 29 as all work or service which is obtained from any person under tremendous threat of any type of penalty and also that the said person has not provided himself as a voluntary worker. It obliges ratifying states to stop forced labor, prosecute such practice and impose tough punishment. Convention No. 105 supplements this by setting a focus on particular practices e.g. forced labor established as political pressure, strikebreaking or racial discrimination. Convention No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention 1999) is aimed at the removal of the most vicious child labor practices, such as slavery, trafficking, forced work and dangerous employment. It binds states to make prompt and adequate efforts to prevent and abolish these worst forms, thus giving protection, rehabilitation and social integration to children affected. In combination, these conventions offer a full-scale legal framework in eliminating forced labour and worst forms of child labour in the world. They focus on prevention, victim-protection, victimization of offenders and international efforts to deal with such violation of human rights (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2020)

Human Rights-Based Approach to Trafficking

A human rights-based approach (HRBA) to trafficking in persons represents a paradigm shift in how governments, international organizations and civil society address the complex issue of human trafficking. Unlike traditional law enforcement or criminal justice models that primarily view trafficked individuals as victims or evidence in prosecuting traffickers, the HRBA recognizes trafficked persons as rights-holders endowed with inherent dignity and entitled to full protection under international human rights law.

Core Principles and Rights

The core principles and rights are given below;

- **Equality and Non-Discrimination:** Every person affected by trafficking must be treated fairly, regardless of gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, or social and economic background. Non-discrimination is a fundamental principle of human rights, ensuring that all survivors have equal access to protection and support services.
- **Rehabilitation and Compensation:** Survivors have the right to receive comprehensive care that addresses their physical, emotional and social recovery. This care should include medical treatment, psychological counseling, education, vocational training and programs that help them reintegrate into society. Additionally, victims should be entitled to compensation and reparations for the injustices they endured, acknowledging trafficking as a violation of their dignity and rights.
- **Legal Support and Access to Justice:** The HRBA guarantees that trafficking survivors have access to legal assistance and protection throughout judicial proceedings. It also ensures their right to participate in prosecuting traffickers, empowering them to seek justice and hold offenders accountable. This is crucial for preventing future crimes and providing redress.
- **Access to Essential Services:** Providing survivors with healthcare, education, safe housing and social support is essential for their healing and reintegration. Secure shelter protects them from further harm, while education and healthcare contribute to their long-term well-being. A vital part of the HRBA is its focus on gender sensitivity and intersectionality. Since women and girls represent the majority of trafficking victims particularly in cases of sexual exploitation responses must address their unique vulnerabilities. These include gender-based violence, discrimination and social exclusion. The approach recognizes how poverty, lack of education and cultural practices intersect with gender to increase risk. Gender-sensitive programs are designed to meet these specific needs, offering trauma-informed care and protection against stigma and re-victimization.

Importantly, the HRBA promotes empowering women and girls as active agents of change, rather than viewing them solely as victims. The HRBA also emphasizes accountability and participation. Governments and institutions are responsible for enforcing laws and policies that protect the rights of trafficking survivors. This involves passing comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation, training law enforcement and judicial officials on human rights standards and fostering coordinated responses across sectors. Moreover, survivors themselves should be actively involved in designing, implementing and evaluating programs that affect them. Their involvement respects their autonomy and ensures that interventions are relevant, effective and responsive to their needs.

Global and Regional Institutional Roles in Combating Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is a complex transnational crime that violates fundamental human rights and requires coordinated efforts by multiple institutions at global and regional levels. Key organizations play distinct but complementary roles in prevention, protection, prosecution and policy development.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)

UNODC acts as an international body that focuses on human trafficking. It gathers information and makes analyses on trafficking trends by compiling a Global Report on Trafficking in Persons every two years using official national data on all countries worldwide to offer essential information of trends in trafficking and the characteristics of victims. There are too many diverse and significant interactions between ocean and land. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), 2022). UNODC is also capable of coming up with global policies like the Palermo Protocol and providing technical assistance to the member states to reinforce both the victim identification and the law enforcement ability by using the law. Also, UNODC extends its research procedures to quantify the actual size of trafficking, which is crucial to quantify the progress towards Sustainable Development Goals to the extent of trafficking (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), 2022).

International Labour Organization (ILO)

ILO is concerned with labor exploitation, which is one of the main aspects of trafficking. It has also elaborated binding conventions, among others, Convention No. 29 (Forced Labor Convention, 1930), Convention No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention, 1999), to which states should prohibit and eliminate forced labor as well as the worst forms of child labor, including trafficking. The ILO assists nations in carrying their conventions by providing guidelines to policymakers, monitoring and capacity building with the objective of safeguarding the vulnerable employees and eliminating the exploitative working position (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), 2022)..

Interpol and Europol

Essential regional enforcers are Interpol and Europol, which promote transnational collaboration in the regional exploration and destruction of networks involved with trafficking. They also organize the intelligence sharing and joint operations as well as training of national police to enhance the detection and prosecution of traffickers. It is because of their international coverage that makes them overcome some of the jurisdictional issues that domestic trafficking cases have strengthening the law enforcement response (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), 2022).

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs such as Anti-Slavery International and Polaris complement governmental efforts by advocating for victims' rights, raising public awareness and providing direct support services. These services include shelter, medical and psychological care, legal assistance and reintegration programs for survivors. NGOs also engage in policy advocacy to strengthen anti-trafficking laws and victim protection mechanisms, ensuring that responses remain victim-centered and rights-based (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), 2022).

Challenges in Implementation of International Human Rights Law Against Human Trafficking

Despite the existence of comprehensive international treaties such as the Palermo Protocol and various human rights instruments, enforcement of anti-trafficking laws remains weak and inconsistent across many countries. Several persistent challenges undermine effective implementation:

1) Weak Domestic Legislation and Limited Enforcement Capacity

Many countries have yet to fully incorporate international anti-trafficking standards into their national laws or lack clear, comprehensive legislation criminalizing all forms of trafficking. Even where laws exist, enforcement is hampered by limited resources, inadequate training and lack of specialized units within law enforcement agencies. Border patrol officers, police and judiciary often lack sufficient knowledge of trafficking laws and victim identification protocols, which leads to poor investigation and prosecution outcomes (king, 2022).

2) Corruption and Complicity of Officials

Corruption within law enforcement, immigration and judicial systems poses a significant barrier. Officials may be bribed or complicit with traffickers, undermining investigations and prosecutions. This corruption erodes public trust and discourages victims from coming forward for fear of retaliation or being treated as criminals (king, 2022).

3) Insufficient Victim Identification and Protection Systems

Victims are often misidentified as criminals (e.g., illegal migrants or sex workers) and subjected to detention or deportation rather than protection and assistance. Many countries lack adequate victim support services such as safe shelters, medical care, psychological counseling and legal aid. Language barriers and victims' fear of traffickers further complicate identification and assistance efforts (king, 2022).

4) Cultural and Gender Norms Reinforcing Exploitation

Deep-rooted cultural practices and gender inequalities contribute to the vulnerability of certain groups, particularly women and children, to trafficking. Social stigma, discrimination and gender-based violence may prevent victims from seeking help or being recognized as victims. These norms also affect the political will to prioritize anti-trafficking measures and victim protection (Russian Law Journal, 2024).

5) Cross-Border Complexities Hindering Prosecution

Human trafficking is inherently transnational, involving multiple jurisdictions. Coordinating investigations, evidence-sharing and prosecutions across borders is complex, costly and time-consuming. Jurisdictional issues and differences in legal definitions or standards impede effective law enforcement cooperation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

6) Use of Digital Platforms to Recruit and Exploit Victims

The rise of digital technologies and social media has provided traffickers with new tools to recruit, advertise and exploit victims anonymously and across borders. Law enforcement often struggles to monitor and regulate these platforms effectively, creating new challenges in detection and intervention (SSRN, 2024).

Case study: Human Trafficking in Pakistan

Human trafficking in Pakistan remains a deeply entrenched and multifaceted problem, involving both internal exploitation and cross-border trafficking. Despite legislative efforts such as the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2018) and recent amendments in 2025 aimed at strengthening penalties and addressing organized begging, enforcement continues to be weak and inconsistent. Pakistan serves as a source, transit and destination country for trafficking victims, including men, women and children trafficked for forced labor, sexual exploitation and other abuses (The Diplomat, 2025). Debt bondage is widespread in sectors like brick kilns and agriculture, where vulnerable workers are trapped in exploitative labor due to insurmountable debts. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by sexual exploitation, including forced prostitution, forced marriages and culturally specific abuses such as bacha bazi (The Express Tribune, 2024). Child trafficking for forced labor and begging remains a critical concern, with thousands of children trafficked annually. Refugees from Afghanistan and the Rohingya community are particularly vulnerable due to their precarious legal status and marginalization (Organized Crime Index, 2023).

Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, illiteracy, gender inequality and limited economic opportunities exacerbate vulnerability to trafficking. Traffickers exploit these conditions, often using false promises of employment or marriage to lure victims. Additionally, traffickers increasingly utilize digital platforms and social media to recruit and control victims, complicating detection and intervention efforts (Muhammad Farhan Khan, 2024). Pakistan's large and growing population, combined with over 70 million active social media users, provides traffickers with new avenues to exploit victims (Muhammad Farhan Khan, 2024). Corruption and complicity among officials remain significant barriers, undermining investigations and prosecutions. Despite thousands of trafficking cases investigated annually, conviction rates remain low and government officials implicated in trafficking-related offenses have not been held accountable (United States Department of States, 2024).

Geographically, Pakistan's porous borders and strategic location facilitate cross-border trafficking and smuggling, complicating law enforcement efforts. The government has taken steps to combat trafficking and migrant smuggling, including launching a National Action Plan in 2021 and conducting crackdowns on human smuggling networks, resulting in numerous arrests (United States Department of States, 2024). However, resource constraints, weak judicial capacity and legal loopholes hinder effective implementation. The labor market's limited capacity, with over one million new entrants annually, further exacerbates the problem by increasing economic desperation and susceptibility to trafficking.

In short, human trafficking in Pakistan is sustained by a combination of socio-economic vulnerabilities, weak enforcement, corruption and evolving trafficking methods, including digital exploitation. Addressing this complex issue requires comprehensive legal reforms, enhanced victim protection and rehabilitation

services, capacity building for law enforcement, anti-corruption measures and public awareness campaigns. Strengthening international cooperation and leveraging technology for detection and prevention are also critical to disrupting trafficking networks and safeguarding human rights.

Recommendations to combat Human Trafficking and protect victims:

There are the following recommendations to combat human trafficking and protect victims;

- **Strengthen domestic legislation to align with international obligations**
States should update and harmonize their national laws with international human rights treaties and protocols they have ratified. This ensures legal frameworks meet global standards for protecting human rights and prosecuting traffickers. Aligning domestic laws with international obligations also facilitates accountability and compliance with treaties like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants.
- **Enhance victim protection and rehabilitation mechanisms**
Victims require comprehensive support including safe shelters, medical care, psychological counseling, legal aid and vocational training to rebuild their lives. Rehabilitation services should be victim-centered, culturally sensitive and uphold confidentiality and dignity. Supporting families of survivors and ensuring access to justice are crucial elements of effective rehabilitation.
- **Train law enforcement and judiciary on human rights-based approaches**
Police, prosecutors and judges need specialized training on international human rights standards and victim-centered approaches to handle trafficking cases sensitively and effectively. This includes understanding laws related to trafficking, victim rights and ethical treatment to improve identification, investigation and prosecution of traffickers while protecting victims' rights.
- **Establish regional cooperation for cross-border trafficking cases**
Human trafficking often involves multiple countries. Regional cooperation mechanisms like linked National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs) or Transnational Referral Mechanisms (TRMs) enable coordinated investigation, victim referral and prosecution across borders. Such cooperation enhances information sharing and victim protection at the regional level.
- **Engage civil society in awareness, rescue and recovery**
Civil society organizations play a vital role in raising public awareness about trafficking risks, conducting rescues, providing survivor services and advocating for policy reforms. Their involvement ensures community participation and accountability in anti-trafficking efforts.
- **Empower women and vulnerable groups through education and economic programs**
Addressing root causes of trafficking involves empowering at-risk populations by improving access to education, vocational training and economic opportunities. This reduces vulnerability to trafficking by promoting self-reliance and social inclusion.

These recommendations together create a holistic approach combining legal reform, victim support, capacity building, cross-border collaboration, community engagement and empowerment to effectively combat human trafficking.

Conclusion

This research has thoroughly explored the deep-rooted problem of human trafficking in Pakistan, placing it within the wider context of weak institutions, widespread corruption and systemic governance failures. Although Pakistan has established strong international commitments and domestic laws such as the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2018), enforcement remains largely ineffective. This allows trafficking networks to operate with near impunity, while victims especially women, children and marginalized communities remain largely invisible within official narratives and state protection systems. The study reveals that human trafficking in Pakistan is sustained by a complex interplay of structural and systemic issues. Corruption within law enforcement and the judiciary, inadequate professional training and political interference significantly weaken anti-trafficking efforts. Frequently, victims face further harm from a system that criminalizes or neglects them, denying access to justice, rehabilitation and compensation. Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, lack of education, displacement and entrenched gender discrimination intensify vulnerabilities, particularly in cases involving sexual exploitation, forced labor, child trafficking and organ trafficking.

Case studies from Pakistan illustrate how trafficking networks operate and highlight the critical roles of state neglect, social stigma and policy apathy in perpetuating cycles of abuse. The invisibility of victims is not merely due to poor data collection or monitoring but is a direct consequence of institutional dysfunction and societal marginalization. In essence, the trafficking crisis in Pakistan is not just a criminal issue but a profound failure of governance and human rights protection. Addressing this challenge requires more than legal reforms; it calls for comprehensive anti-corruption initiatives, strong support systems for survivors and a shift towards a rights-based, gender-sensitive and victim centered framework. Effective solutions must emphasize survivor rehabilitation, legal assistance, community empowerment and institutional accountability. Without these fundamental changes, antitrafficking efforts will remain disjointed and ineffective, leaving vulnerable populations exposed to ongoing exploitation. Ultimately, the persistence of human trafficking in Pakistan reflects a broader neglect of the state's responsibility to protect the rights and dignity of its citizens. Meaningful progress can only be achieved through coordinated legal, institutional and societal reforms grounded in transparency, accountability and a genuine commitment to human rights.

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